

CHAPTER 4

Family Resistance as a Tool in Urban School Reform

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Beatriz and her husband arrived in the United States in 2001 from a small, rural town in Oaxaca, Mexico. Beatriz came from a farming family, attended public school, and graduated high school before moving to southern Arizona with her husband who had secured a construction job. Although Beatriz found the transition from Mexico to the United States difficult, she was excited about raising a family where she had extended family and believed economic opportunities abounded. Her hope was to acquire enough money in the United States so she and her husband could buy land in Oaxaca. By 2004, Beatriz had two daughters, Amelia and Megan, and she was certain her family would be back in Mexico in the next couple years. However, Beatriz's hopes for her family began to change when Megan turned a year old.

Megan was ill from age 1 to 3 with ear infections, and at age 3, was diagnosed with autism. Beatriz and her husband had never heard of autism and were perplexed by the diagnosis. Although both had noticed Megan was not developing communicative and interactive skills as quickly as her older sister had, they assumed Megan was "*atrasada*" and "*lenta*" (behind and slow). They committed themselves as proactive communicators with Megan's teachers to ensure Megan's success in spite of her challenges.

On the first day of Megan's kindergarten year, Beatriz was immediately aware of the language barrier between herself and Mrs. S., Megan's teacher. Beatriz knew very little English and Mrs. S. did not speak any Spanish. Beatriz told Mrs. S. about the detrimental effects dairy and sugar had on Megan's behavior and wanted Mrs. S. to monitor Megan's eating during recess and lunch. Instead of feeling heard, Beatriz felt ignored so she returned the following day with her husband whose conversational skills in English were more developed than hers. This time Beatriz sensed through Mrs. S.'s body language a de-

liberate resistance in responding to her husband's questions, perhaps due to prejudice against her. She shared in an interview with Cristina Santamaría Graff, "*Yo estoy segura que si yo fuera Americana, tuviera la piel [blanca] y el cabello rubio, luego me hubieran conseguido los servicios que necesitaba mi niña.*" (I'm certain that if I were American, had White skin and blond hair, they [educators/special education team] would have given my daughter the services that she needed.) Out of frustration, Beatriz and her husband stopped making classroom visits. Soon afterwards, Megan got into trouble for disruptive behavior and was, according to the principal, "uncontrollable." When Beatriz picked Megan up from school, sugar covered Megan's mouth and face. Beatriz felt the educators had let her daughter down.

Beatriz sought alternative support networks, specifically from groups for parents of children with disabilities, to assist her in communicating Megan's needs. She soon heard about Cristina's Participation Action Research (PAR) group centered on creating action plans for addressing barriers to participation in schools for Mexican-origin parents of children with disabilities. After the 16-week PAR study, Beatriz reported she had begun to let go of negative feelings she felt toward Mrs. S. and was finding positive ways to communicate more effectively with her. Furthermore, as Beatriz gained confidence in her own communicative skills and knowledge, she began to see herself as a leader and sought opportunities through which she could be a resource for other Spanish-speaking parents and families of children with disabilities.

HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED FAMILIES AND RESISTANCE

Families like Beatriz's who are "historically underserved" (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010, p. 279) desire excellent educational opportunities for their children and are willing to make significant sacrifices to support them academically. However, within the U.S. school system they find themselves at a disadvantage that can be attributed to their diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, as well as their limited social and economic status. Historically underserved families have been represented as limited, peripheral, or nonparticipants in their children's education by school personnel whose expectations of parents are based in U.S. mainstream definitions of parent involvement (Guldberg, 2008; Ramirez, 2003; Turney & Kao, 2009). When *parent involvement* is conceptualized as specific behaviors such as volunteering in the classroom, attending school events and conferences, and correcting a child's homework, school personnel may overlook or dismiss alternative and subtler ways that families participate in

their children's education (Ramirez, 2003; Ramirez & Soto-Hinman, 2009; Valencia & Black, 2002). Historically underserved families who have children with disabilities are further marginalized if they do not possess the skills, knowledge, or language proficiency to participate as equal stakeholders in key decisions: for example, at the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings where, many times, they are expected to understand educational and medical terminology and complex concepts related to diagnosis, assessment, procedural guidelines, and special educational laws (Salas, 2004; Salas, Lopez, Chinn, & Menchaca-Lopez, 2005).

Accordingly, families who are rarely included in the "critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices" (Fine, 1993, p. 683) that directly impact their children have resisted systems that locate them in subordinated positions of status and power. In school systems where families are "outsiders" *family resistance*, either overt or hidden, has been construed as disinterest or as a threat (Olivos, 2004). In this context, resistance is an act against expectations and norms of what it is to be a parent and to be involved at school. For example, resistance can manifest in what is perceived by school personnel to be a lack of interest or involvement in school-related activities (e.g., nonattendance at teacher-parent conferences), a direct opposition to school rules and teacher expectations (e.g., apparent apathy if their child is late to school or misses instructional time), or a deliberate attempt to thwart teachers' efforts to improve student achievement (e.g., lack of assistance with homework).

In school systems where families are located as "insiders" but do not have equal status and power in the educational decision making about their children, family resistance may be demonstrated through subtler, less overt ways. For example, families may appear to concur with school personnel, but in actuality weigh their options carefully and choose to what degree they will cooperate.

Built on understandings of the powerful roles families must play in their children's education, this chapter explores how urban education reform efforts focused on empowerment and authentic change understand family resistance as a transformational resource to reposition historically underserved families as insiders and equal stakeholders within school systems. Elements of Beatriz's story are woven throughout the chapter to illustrate specific manifestations of resistance as a resource in urban education reform as she confronts educational systems that debilitate or empower her as a participant in her daughter's education and schooling. Understanding *why* and *how* historically underserved families resist school systems and the ways in which systems constrain or support these families is essential in reform efforts that seek to transform educational structures and practices that have excluded and marginalized this population.

Family Resistance in Urban School Reform

Historically underserved families are generally positioned in subordinate or inferior roles within school systems whose values and traditions are reflective of the dominant society (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Gonzalez & Ayala-Alcantar, 2008; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2008). Because resistance literature "has been marred by its own theoretical and conceptual limitations" (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 310), historically underserved families consistently have been represented through deficit perspectives that prevent their rich cultural and historical legacies from being explored multidimensionally and dynamically. In urban school reform the purpose of understanding family resistance is to unearth and illuminate reform issues to be addressed that may have otherwise been overlooked by system insiders, as well as to recognize its manifestations so that educators, as well as other stakeholders, can proactively address challenges potentially detrimental in building authentic, collaborative relationships between families and schools. While resistant behavior can be reactionary, self-defeating, conformist, or transformational (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), when conceptualized as a resource for transformational change in urban school reform, it becomes a force through which marginalized and disempowered populations oppose oppressive systems, overcome challenges, and become empowered. Ideally, this empowerment occurs with the support of those representing the dominant culture (i.e., school personnel and leaders).

In order to achieve these shifting understandings of resistance as a resource, transformational frameworks, such as the Systemic Change Framework (Ferguson, Kozleski, & Smith, 2003), provide educators with a multidimensional lens through which resistance among historically underserved families is examined in critical, yet positive, ways. Embedded within such frameworks are action-oriented goals that all stakeholders who are committed to authentic change must consider: (1) to excavate issues relevant to urban education reform from families' perspectives; (2) to determine which educational structures and systems are creating barriers to families' empowerment; (3) to acknowledge families' unique and creative approaches to communication and participation in their children's education and schooling; (4) to define the space in which authentic collaboration and meaningful interaction intersect for school personnel and families; (5) to document and analyze stakeholders' change efforts within school systems to determine to what degree steps toward reform have been integrated and effective in producing long-lasting and empowering transformation; and (6) to critique social oppression and to be motivated by social justice (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Understanding Family Resistance

Now, we turn to a review of literature on what we assert are problematic ways that family resistance has been theorized, providing examples from Beatriz's story where appropriate as rationale for how and why these theorizations may be reframed as transformational and contributive in urban education reform efforts.

Theorizing resistance as family deficit. Through deficit-driven frameworks, people of "difference" have been systematically marginalized in our society through institutional systems that have supported the imperialistic notion that White European Americans are more intelligent and thus superior to all others (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Through this mindset the disenfranchisement of the "other" has been legitimized as sound practice to protect traditional "American" values (Berkhofer, 1978). As retaliation to unfair practices that place disproportionate amounts of privilege and power in the hands of those representing the dominant group, many people of "difference" have resisted, protested, or spoken out to reclaim the freedoms and protections that are rightfully theirs (Freire, 1970/2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

In the educational arena, deficit theories gained popularity during the 1950s and 1960s and have continued to influence practices and policies that detrimentally impact historically underserved students and their families. IQ and cultural deficit theories posit that limited aptitude and an inferior cultural upbringing are at the heart of poor academic performance for students who come from historically underserved families (Suzuki & Valencia, 1997; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). When traditional notions of parent involvement are framed through a deficit lens, families become the scapegoat for the significant achievement gap between White, middle-class students and their own children, as educators equate what they perceive as families' apparent disinterest and lack of involvement in their children's schooling to low test scores, high dropout rates, and school failure (Olivos, 2004; Yosso, 2005). With this logic, some educators and researchers have come to the conclusion that an education makes little difference for students who are considered intellectually or culturally inferior (Bernstein, 1975; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1973).

Families' roles and responsibilities in deficit-oriented school systems are constrained by perceived assumptions of what historically underserved families can contribute to student outcomes and by a failure of school personnel to recognize families' strengths as well as the meaningful ways they participate in their children's education. Often, parents are dismissed as important stakeholders in schools when their actions or behaviors are interpreted as insignificant or mistaken for apathy (Cummins, 1996; Olivos, 2004; Valdes,

1996). Families, however, are not always victims of the structural determinants that undervalue their importance. Their agency enables them to resist, mediate, or negotiate each situation they face and decide what makes sense for their family and circumstances (Giroux, 1983; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

An alternative way to understand what some perceive as lack of interest in children's schooling is illustrated by cases where Latino families have demonstrated resistance to unsupportive school systems by choosing to be absent from events or by remaining silent, often interpreted as laziness or disinterest (Valencia & Black, 2002). However, when understood as "a defense mechanism against oppression and humiliation" (Olivos, 2004, p. 30), absence becomes a conscious action and statement. Similarly, Latino families have used silence as a tool to avoid feeling exploited or inferior in conversations with dominant White group members (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008). Latino families who feel undercut and undervalued in meetings or interactions with school personnel have, many times, chosen silence to protect their dignity even if they do not agree with or understand the terminology discussed or decisions presented (Salas, 2004).

For Beatriz, maintaining a sense of pride for herself and for her family was a compelling reason for discontinuing her one-on-one conversations with Megan's teacher. Ceasing classroom visits that inevitably led her to feel ignored and rejected was an act of self-preservation, even though her action meant a continued uncertainty about whether her daughter's health and well-being were being positively addressed. Her inability to communicate effectively with Megan's teacher and her perceptions of school personnel's assumptions of Mexican parents led her to the following conclusion: "*Es muy triste porque ellos creen porque es uno mexicano o porque es uno hispano, uno nunca va a hablar, uno nunca va a investigar.*" ("It is sad because they believe that because one is Mexican or because one is Hispanic, that one is not going to talk or one is not going to investigate.")

Beatriz believed that being Mexican prevented her from being taken seriously and that her expert knowledge as a parent was invalidated because of language barriers and discrimination. Consequently, she resisted exclusionary school practices by choosing absence from and silence in daily conversations with Megan's teacher.

Theorizing resistance as cultural difference and cultural capital. Unlike IQ and cultural deficit theories that place the onus of a student's poor achievement in schools on his or her heredity and upbringing, the theory of cultural difference describes students' underachievement as resulting from a home-school mismatch (Lareau, 1989; O'Connor, 2001). The discrepancy existing between the traditions, values, culture, and language of the school environment versus those in the home environment has been analyzed to

document how differences can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication between school personnel, students, and families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Harry, 2002; Peña, 2000; Zarate, 2007). Underlying presumptions of this theory, however, stress the need of historically underserved families to conform and assimilate to the school culture so that their children will not be significantly disadvantaged (Smart & Smart, 1995). An expectation exists that real change in attitude or action should be assumed by families; school personnel may be aware of their privileged positions, but are not urged to transform the ways in which they interact (Gonzalez & Ayala-Alcantar, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, 2000). More often than not, "schools facilitate the exclusion of students and parents by (consciously or unconsciously) establishing activities that require specific majority, culturally based, knowledge and behaviors about the school as an institution" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 21). This exclusion is further perpetuated when school personnel continue with the status quo and rarely review and reflect critically upon the ways in which their actions perpetuate behaviors that isolate, distance, or marginalize families from diverse backgrounds.

Like cultural difference theory, social, cultural, and economic capital theories compare those with status, power, resources, and financial stability to those without. *Capital*, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), is an accumulation of cultural knowledge through formal schooling and other experiences, as well as the skills and abilities one inherits. Those with extensive social networks and connections (social capital), a strong education and mastery of language (cultural capital), and significant monetary assets and resources (economic capital) are likely to have significant leverage and influence to navigate a profitable or successful trajectory within U.S. society (Yosso, 2005).

In educational literature, families who have been historically underserved are typically portrayed as entering the school system with deficiencies since their capital may not be recognized as valuable by those representing the dominant culture. Many times, school personnel, who are limited in their knowledge of families' cultural backgrounds and traditions, are unable to connect students' success in school to the *funds of knowledge* or the repositories of skills and knowledge that families transmit generationally (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). When capital is positively associated with paradigms that privilege White European Americans, the attainment of it is exclusively available to a limited few. Historically underserved families, by definition, are consequently restricted to the pursuit of this capital and never have the opportunity to fully attain it.

Frameworks that analyze historically underserved families' value and worth by comparing them to members of the dominant U.S. culture are inherently biased. When school systems and other institutions that provide services to these families evaluate them by using tools or criteria based on

dominant culture norms, historically underserved families rarely meet specified requirements or desired expectations (Baca & Cervantes, 2003). In frameworks where families like Beatriz's are disproportionately categorized as lacking core resources, knowledge, and skills because of cultural, economic, social, and linguistic differences, resistance is generally reactionary, self-defeating, or conformist (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Each of these types of resistance perpetuates "coercive relations of power" (Cummins, 2009, p. 261) in which the oppressor and the oppressed demonstrate behaviors that obstruct efforts leading to social justice and transformative change.

In the following example a White, monolingual English-speaking social worker visited Beatriz's home to evaluate Megan's progress and to determine a need for additional family resources. Beatriz was excited to engage in a conversation with someone who understood the importance of specific interventions and services. At first, the visit was congenial and the social worker suggested several therapies and treatments from which Megan could benefit. However, when Beatriz mentioned that she did not have a Social Security card, the social worker changed her demeanor (as described by Beatriz), "*No, yo creo que esos tratamientos son muy costosos y ustedes no pueden pagar*" (No, I think that the treatments are too expensive for you to afford). Beatriz concluded that the knowledge she had about Megan's well-being was dismissed by the social worker's inherent biases about Beatriz's documentation status. Relatedly, the social worker stopped listening to Beatriz's recommendations and "never acquired one therapy (for Megan) in the 3 years [they] had her."

Beatriz felt unfairly judged and was upset that Megan would not be able to receive services to improve her communication and social skills. Her resistance to this situation, however, was "self-defeating." Even though she understood the inequity of her situation, she continued to "engage in behavior that [was] not transformational and . . . help[ed] to re-create the oppressive conditions from which it originated" (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 317). Beatriz reacted by "complain[ing] to the supervisor and other service coordinators" that the social worker deliberately denied services to Megan. She also informed the supervisor that she would tell other parents about her negative experience if Megan did not receive the assistance she requested. At this point the supervisor intervened where the social worker had not. Under pressure, the supervisor acted quickly and enrolled Megan in two programs that specialized in therapies and interventions for children with autism. However, Beatriz's strategy for getting Megan services perpetuated the type of coercive action generally associated with dominant group oppression. Her resistance was "self-defeating" because it continued to be "destructive to . . . others" (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 317) even though the outcomes were favorable for Megan.

Theorizing resistance in collaborative relationships. Collaboration between school personnel and families is a term generally applied to the relationships, interactions, and communication that occur to promote students' academic success. Collaborative relationships have been categorized as parent involvement, parent participation, parent-school partnerships, family-centered partnerships, and school-family-community connections (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). The essence of collaboration involves the equal participation of stakeholders who are "voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 7). Ideal collaboration between school personnel and families is, therefore, equitable, empowering, and transformative as both parties achieve positive outcomes through a mutually beneficial and respectful process. On the other hand, collaboration in which families are invited to be equal partners with school personnel but are not treated with parity engenders misunderstanding and mistrust (Friend & Cook, 2007).

The difficulty with collaboration in school settings is that often families do not enter the relationship on equal footing; instead a type of "turfism" occurs in which school personnel control the interactions and steer conversations in the direction of their choosing (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004), attempting to engage families in collaboration that is "family focused" but not "family driven" (Osher & Osher, 2002). Fine (1993) asserts that "The presumption of equality between parents and schools, and the refusal to address power struggles, has systematically undermined real educational transformation" (p. 684). Because many families, especially those who are historically underserved, are not always treated as equals even when invited to collaborate with school professionals, they may resist entering into partnerships while participating in meetings or school events (Santamaría, 2009). Agency plays a critical role in the ways in which families choose to conform to or negate decisions impacting their children. How resistance is manifested depends greatly upon a family's ability to navigate the system by understanding which choices are available to them when confronted with outcomes or decisions that, in their view, are unfavorable.

For Beatriz, there were three distinctive ways in which she and other Mexican-origin parents resisted unequal collaborative relationships in educational settings. Based on a qualitative research study conducted by the author (Santamaría, 2009) in Arizona, five mothers of Mexican origin (two born in the United States, three born and raised in Mexico) including Beatriz explored the specific barriers to participation they faced in schools and their evolving roles as parents over a 16-week period as they critically discussed the origin and manifestation of these barriers. Findings revealed that parents openly sought opportunities for collaboration and support. However, when Beatriz and the other parents did not feel "*confianza*" (trust/confidence) in school professionals who were attempting to communicate or establish

relationships with them, they turned to others who could provide them with authentic support (i.e., receptionists who spoke Spanish, parent-support groups outside of the school setting, other parents whom they would speak to in the school hallways or parking lots). School receptionists were strong allies for many of the parents in the study; Beatriz described them as "The only people who support me . . . [and] who translate what the teachers are saying." Beatriz and the other parents would often approach the school receptionists prior to meeting with their children's teachers to get "insider" information or advice about the ways in which they could get the best services for their children.

Beatriz and the other monolingual Spanish-speaking parents would attend the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, write down information during the meeting, and then participate in Spanish-speaking parent-support groups to go over the questions they had written down. Instead of asking questions to the other IEP team members (i.e., school professionals), they felt more comfortable asking members of the support group to clarify specific items on the IEP. As an explanation, one parent offered:

Generalmente los hispanos no somos buenos para juntas grandes, porque nos da vergüenza levantar la mano, nos da vergüenza hacer una pregunta que a lo mejor no es apropiada. Los grupos pequeños y con confianza son más efectivos.

(Generally, we Hispanics are not good at big meetings because it embarrasses us to raise our hand, it embarrasses us to ask a question that may not be appropriate. Small groups based in trust are more effective.)

Historically underserved families, of any race or ethnicity, tend to resist systems or people who do not engender trust and instead seek others who will listen and validate them (Harris, 2006; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). For the parents in the study, some of the most meaningful and beneficial discussions about their children's IEPs occurred in school hallways or parking lots with other parents. Discussions between parents in these informal spaces influenced parents' decisions whether or not to contest options and outcomes presented by school personnel at IEP meetings.

Family Resistance as a Tool for Transformative Reform in Urban Contexts

When family resistance is understood as a tool to provide deep insight into the ways in which families provide "feedback or express . . . a differing point of view" (Mauer, 2006, p. 122) subtle and overt behaviors by families

that go against expected norms can then be analyzed as valid communication to be considered, discussed, and acted upon. Grounding the concept of “resistance as a tool” within urban reform are at least two assertions. The first is that families’ resistance must be viewed as *strength* for authentic change to manifest. Therefore, resistance as an efficient and productive tool in urban school reform should be defined by the creative and unexpected ways in which families “negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 315). Instead of dismissing families’ interpretations of the interactions and communications at schools in which they are involved, school leaders and personnel have the opportunity to observe, listen to, and understand these multifaceted and rich landscapes of interpretation as pieces of crucial information necessary to build mutually rewarding relationships.

A second assertion lies in the willingness of the stakeholders involved in the day-to-day interactions that occur within school settings to access *critical consciousness* (“*conscientização*”; Freire, 1970/2000, 1974/2007): an awareness of one’s personal agency and an understanding that life’s events are not predetermined based on presumably fixed factors (e.g., race, culture, language). Hegemonic belief systems that place individuals or groups of people on immutable and static trajectories based on cultural background and history must be refuted to break oppressive patterns. One of the first steps, according to Freire (1970/2000, 1974/2007), is for the individual to reach critical awareness to take control of his or her life to generate positive changes. This critical consciousness and the realization of the empowerment that is derived from deliberate, positive action is the agency each individual inherently possesses. When accessed, agency is a powerful force through which an individual, through critical reflection and compassionate understanding, can carefully coconstruct with other stakeholders new realities in which every person is respected and valued (Cammarota & Romero, 2006).

Resistance as a tool and third space. In school settings “resistance as a tool” is the interplay between accepting difference as strength and the choice to become critically conscious of the possibilities that exist when individuals from all backgrounds arrive within a space of complete openness to manifest mutual, cocreated realities that benefit everyone—especially the child. This space has been conceptualized as the “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) where the oppressor/colonizer and the oppressed/colonized can negotiate with one another and reposition themselves in ways that disrupt hegemonic structures and practices that lead to disharmony and division. In classrooms, the third space represents the space where students’ strengths and experience are relevant and incorporated into the daily curriculum as an important part of student learning (Benson, 2010; Moje, Ciechanowski,

Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004). For historically underserved families, the implications of third space at IEP meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school events are vast and deep and serve to inform needed areas of reform. Third space is a shift of perception through which parents and families become leaders within institutional spaces that serve our students. In this space their voices are not only heard but also initiate action, change, and transformation in the schools, at home, and in the spaces “in-between” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1).

The concept of “third space” is embedded in urban education reform frameworks, such as the Systemic Change Framework (Ferguson, Kozleski, & Smith, 2003), that are transformative and lead to long-lasting, school-community-centered change. Within these frameworks an empowering environment and “a common language” (Kozleski & Smith, 2009, p. 434) among stakeholders who are part of micro- and macrointeractions within school systems are essential to trust building and mutual understanding. Third space can also describe the place in which “the oppressed” awoken to the understanding of their own agency and power (Freire, 1970/2000). In transformational frameworks, however, an additional element must be present for authentic change to occur: “The oppressors” must also “awaken” and become critically conscious of the need for social justice and action in our schools.

Those who are part of the dominant culture or in positions of power must suspend belief systems that create artificial hierarchies in which historically underserved populations are relegated to inferior roles. When parents and families of children with disabilities are stripped of their expertise and knowledge about their own children and are expected to defer to others in positions of authority about what is best for their child, the imbalances and inequities of the system are obvious. The change toward transformation and reform in schools lies in the willingness of the dominant culture to fully accept that the well-being of each child is predicated on the cooperative effort of, informed by and equally distributed among, *all* stakeholders committed to the child’s academic and personal achievements. For families, especially for those who are historically underserved, this transformation would manifest through empowering conversations and interactions with school personnel in which families’ ideas, insights, and expertise would be considered equally important to information given by a teacher, school leader, or educator. Decisions about a child’s academic and behavioral goals would be based on input and feedback provided by all stakeholders to promote mutual trust and to ensure the best possible education for the child. Even new approaches to working with the child that are family or culturally based would be validated by school personnel through their openness to discussing the ways in which this alternative information could be used to strengthen the child’s educational plan.

As stated earlier, transformational frameworks provide educators with a multidimensional lens through which resistance among historically underserved families can be analyzed in critically conscious ways that lead to action-oriented school reform. We turn now to present an example of how such a framework may inform practice within urban education reform efforts through the use of participatory action research.

Resistance as a Tool and Participatory Action Research. Participatory action research (PAR) is both framework and methodology. “Resistance as a tool” within this framework is a key component to how families’ knowledge and expertise is accepted, incorporated, and valued as well as the ways in which families are repositioned as colleagues with school personnel. At its core, PAR is a collaborative approach to research that emphasizes using systematic methods while taking action (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Conceptually, PAR is a process in which all stakeholders involved have equal status in determining the course of action ultimately taken (Fals Borda, 1991; Maguire, 1987). As an emancipatory approach to taking action against oppressive systems, PAR is centered on providing opportunities for an individual or group to “adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality” (Freire, 1974/2007, p. 4).

In Freire’s (1970/2000) description of PAR, historically underserved groups are integrated into the research process as “co-investigators” (p. 106) rather than merely research subjects. The concept of “co-investigation” when applied to relationships between school personnel and families translates as the interactions that occur when stakeholders enter third space as equals to negotiate roles and responsibilities, to investigate the best outcomes for the child, and to take action on decisions reached by consensus. Moreover, co-investigation requires an invested long-term commitment by all stakeholders to take accountability for the decisions agreed upon and the willingness to follow through on actions for which each individual is responsible.

Educators who are interested in authentic collaboration can easily establish communication with diverse families without needing to invite them to participate in a formal research investigation. Although the word *research* is embedded within PAR, working with parents in a systematic and goal-oriented manner is not dependent upon conducting a formal study. PAR is predicated on stakeholders’ willingness to work together for the collective good. Educators who are dedicated to the well-being and achievement of all students need only to initiate contact with families who are also willing and able to make the same commitment. There are many ways to contact parents, even those whose first language is not English. Many researchers, however, have emphasized that with Latino families an *official invitation*, whether a phone call, a note home, an email, or one-on-one contact, is

FIGURE 4.1. Plan of Action Worksheet in English and Spanish

POINTS TO BE DISCUSSED/TEMAS DE DISCUSIÓN

- The stated concern/el asunto de interés
- The probable solution/la solución probable
- Timeline for action/la cronología de acción
- Roles and responsibilities/los papeles y responsabilidades
- Location of where the action will take place/ubicación de dónde tomará la acción
- Other ingredients agreed upon/otros ingredientes en que estamos de acuerdo

From *Mexican origin parents with children with disabilities project: Using a critically compassionate intellectualism model to support and foster their participation in U.S. school through a Participatory Action Research Project* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona] by C. C. Santamaría, 2009. Copyright 2009 by *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 70(4), 474. Adapted with permission of the author.

especially effective in eliciting parent participation (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Griego-Jones, 2003; Jonson, 1999; Ramirez, 2003).

One important extension of PAR is the creation of an action plan (see Figure 4.1) that is inclusive of all stakeholders’ insights and contributions. Incorporating an action plan as part of collaborative relationships with families is highly recommended as a way to structure common goals and to be responsive and accountable to everyone’s needs (John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, 2007). Additionally, action plans are highly effective in documenting change over time as stakeholders are able to demonstrate, in worksheet or spreadsheet form, how goals and objectives are consistently being met. Because an action plan generally is a cowritten agreement among and between stakeholders, all those involved in the process and outcomes of the goals and objectives discussed are consciously aware of their roles and responsibilities. By being critically conscious of the procedural steps taken throughout the process of creating and implementing positive changes that directly impact the child/student, stakeholders take hold of their own agency and witness their actions coming to fruition.

Educators, when located in third space with families, have the opportunity to analyze perceived resistance openly and positively. In PAR, third space is the location where stakeholders become co-investigators or cocreators in the process and outcomes of the decision making. Family resistance as a tool within third space is part of the negotiation process in which differing points of view are discussed critically and constructively allowing stakeholders to equally participate in and contribute to the generation of ideas and their implementation. Disagreements that arise within third space are welcomed rather than feared. Personal or structural barriers are discussed and analyzed as part of the overall process. In third space, stakeholders who are open to the process of reaching consensus understand the importance of dissent if conflicts are resolved through respectful communication

and healthy interactions. Successful, long-lasting, urban reform efforts are only possible if resistance among and between stakeholders is accepted as a necessary vehicle through which meaningful discussion can lead to both community building and systemic change.

Another fundamental component of third space within PAR is critical self-reflection about one's role and influence as a stakeholder. Educators or researchers working with historically underserved families of children with disabilities need to be aware of their privileged positions so that thoughts, words, and actions are consciously deliberated and reflected upon. It is not enough to enter into a collaborative partnership with families if underlying good intentions consist of a proclivity toward biases and stereotypes that have never been analyzed genuinely. Educators who commit to urban educational reform take on the responsibility of being conscientious of their motives and should realize that families who volunteer to enter into collaborative relationships for the benefit of their children are likely to have their own expectations. Instead of passing judgment on these expectations, educators can actively listen to the words and meaning behind statements or emotions to uncover possible fears, mistrust, or apprehension on the part of families who may feel vulnerable or uneasy about sharing power with school personnel (Cummins, 2000, 2009). Then educators can demonstrate genuine trust by allowing families to speak their minds, to respond to them in a nonjudgmental manner, and to include families' concerns and ideas as part of the solution to challenging situations (Noddings, 2003).

BEATRIZ: THE ROAD TO CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND EMPOWERMENT

For Beatriz, several factors contributed to the shift of perspective she experienced during the 16-week PAR study in which she participated. At the beginning of the investigation, Beatriz demonstrated anger and frustration toward Megan's teacher and other school personnel who provided services to Megan. From her point of view, these educators were quick to discriminate against her because of her cultural and language background as well as her economic, social, and citizenship status. She reacted to their actions and to her perceptions of their motives by resisting communication and interaction that she believed would further disempower her and her family. As a result of her resistance, she had become increasingly isolated from Megan's school which, ironically, contributed to other feelings of disempowerment. Beatriz's fears had reached a heightened state at one of the first IEP meetings she attended in which Megan's teacher, with whom she had not interacted in weeks, told her that Megan needed to be in a self-contained classroom:

Como siempre he mencionado quiero que [Megan] conviva con niños regulares. . . . La maestra de educación especial me quiso espantar. Me dijo que si [Megan] no se iba a la clase de educación especial, iba a perder todos los servicios. Que ya no iba a tener derecho a nada.

(As I have always mentioned, I want Megan to be with typical children. . . . The special education teacher wanted to scare me. She told me that if Megan didn't go to the special education classroom, she was going to lose all her services. That I was no longer going to have any rights.)

As a parent who was unfamiliar with the U.S. school system, with special education services and laws, with her rights as a parent of a child with disabilities, and with the language and terminology used at IEP meetings, Beatriz was at a great disadvantage. Feeling intimidated by Megan's teacher led Beatriz to search outside of the school system to find support, security, and validation. She believed the only way to find authentic support was to speak to other parents who were experiencing similar challenges since teachers and other school personnel "only wanted to scare us so that their programs would [appear to be] the only and best ones." Beatriz's perception was that school personnel had already formed biases against certain types of parents. Parents who fell into negative stereotypes were automatically categorized as ignorant, uneducated, and powerless. Because she was unwilling to accept certain outcomes for Megan (i.e., placement in a self-contained classroom), she resisted by reacting against decisions Megan's teacher recommended. She decided to fight for an inclusive setting in which Megan would be integrated for the full day in a general education classroom. To achieve this goal, Beatriz attended support groups for Spanish-speaking parents of children with autism.

Uno como mamá tiene que buscar un grupo de apoyo. Yo he visto muchos grupos que se reúnen en un restaurante, y puede uno compartir sus opiniones, sus experiencias y decir, ¿Puedes ir a este lado? ¿Puedes pedirle esto a tu coordinadora? ¿Hay estos servicios? ¿Hay unas cosas que uno no sabe? Otras mamás nos pueden decir.

(As a mom, one needs to find a support group. I have seen many groups that gather together in a restaurant, and one can share one's opinions, one's experiences, and say, "Can you go to this side? Can you ask your coordinator this? Are there these services? Is there something that one doesn't know?" Other moms can tell us.)

Sharing Power in Third Space

The main purpose of the PAR study (Santamaría, 2009) was to analyze the ways in which parent participants of Mexican origin defined parent involvement over time as they critically reflected upon their roles and responsibilities in their children's education through structured discussion sessions that led to specific action-oriented goals. Santamaría Graff entered into third space with these parents and became a co-investigator as she learned, through her *novice* role (Lave & Wenger, 1991), about the structural and personal barriers parents resisted and overcame as they discovered different tools to navigate the educational system.

Santamaría Graff was aware consciously of the importance of sharing power and space as a means to position all participants as equals. By establishing third space at the beginning of the study, co-investigators (including the authors) were able to share intimate accounts of their fears, sorrows, and joys within a safe, trustworthy, and mutually respectful environment. As parent co-investigators created an action plan based on immediate and long-term needs, Santamaría Graff acted as a facilitator to ensure equal representation in discussion and planning sessions and to document the process in various forms so that the information was accessible to all participants.

Another important aspect of third space in the PAR study was the educator's detachment from outcomes derived from traditional expectations of how parents should interact or communicate in the specific venue provided. For example, Santamaría Graff presented an article on parent empowerment so that parent co-investigators could critically discuss the material. During the conversation, parents disagreed with the manner in which "empowerment" was presented. Instead of stepping in to control the outcome of the discussion, Santamaría Graff observed as parents contributed opinions until reaching a place of respectful disagreement. A safe and trustworthy environment was necessary for conversation to flow and for trust among parent co-investigators to unfold as they shared power within the collaborative space created.

Transformation Through Action-Oriented Change

Beatriz's transformation during the 16-week PAR study was influenced by the opportunity to *convivir* (share meaningful interactions) with other parents who came from similar backgrounds and to feel *confianza* (mutual trust) and *respeto* (respect) as a co-investigator. Through five intense discussion and planning group sessions lasting approximately 1½ hours each, Beatriz was able to share her frustrations, fears, desires, and hopes in a comprehensive and uninhibited manner. Developing strong ties with other co-investigators led her from feeling *aislada* (isolated) to supported and confident.

Beatriz was unable to secure Megan's placement in a general education classroom during the time in which the study took place. However, through discussion and planning sessions she listened attentively to other parents who were going through similar challenges and began to critically reflect upon the ways in which she could take action to forge a better relationship with Megan's teacher. At the end of the PAR study, Beatriz commented on the ways in which she learned from other parents of how to approach Megan's teacher and other school personnel:

Lo que he aprendido mucho es cómo dirigirme a las maestras de la escuela de [Megan], cómo pedir las cosas cómo defender los derechos de los niños. Aprendí que hay que comunicarnos más, pedir ayuda, que no estamos solos, por eso hay tantos grupos que nos pueden ayudar y hay que asistir, hay que ir a las reuniones a lo mejor no todos nos sirven pero de algo podemos aprender allí conocer a otras personas para que nos pueda ayudar porque también ellos han pasado por lo mismo que nosotros hemos pasado.

(What I have learned the most is how to address the teachers at Megan's school, how to ask for things, how to defend children's rights. I learned that we need to communicate more, ask for help, that we aren't alone, that's why there are so many groups that can help and assist us, we need to go to the meetings [and] there is the possibility that not all the meetings can serve us, but we can learn there, get to know other people so that they can help us and also because they have gone through what we've gone through.) (Santamaría, 2009, p. 397)

Beatriz experienced empowerment the moment she understood she was not alone and had the power and knowledge to access others who would support her. According to Delgado-Gaitan (1991), "Empowerment is an ongoing intentional process centered in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (p. 23). Delgado-Gaitan's definition of empowerment encapsulated Beatriz's experience during the PAR study as she began to reclaim her inner power as a resourceful and passionate mother who was driven to "give back to the community." Having felt like an "outsider" from the school system because of her cultural and linguistic background, she realized how her experiences as a Mexican immigrant mother of a child with autism could benefit parents who were undergoing similar challenges. At one of the parent-support groups Beatriz attended during the PAR study, a parent approached her about starting her own support group. She shared the following:

Entonces dije, "Yo tengo que hacer algo." Y fue cuando empecé a conocer, a investigar, a informarme y tratar de hacer todo lo mejor que se pudiera, ¿no? Y eso me gustaría más que nada por las familias que apenas reciben un diagnóstico, que no saben que hacer. Que no sabe adonde ir. Por eso es que decía yo sería bueno, ¿pues alguien no?, hacer un grupo de las mamás que ya sabemos para la familias que apenas están empezando o esas familias que reciben un diagnóstico.

(And then I said, "I have to do something." It was then I began to learn, to investigate, to inform myself, and to try to do everything I could better, you know? And what I liked more than anything for the families that have just received a diagnosis and don't know what to do. They don't know where to go. For that reason he [a person from her Spanish-speaking support group] said that I'd be good, well someone, right?, to start a group with the mothers that we already know, for families that are just beginning or those families that receive a diagnosis.)

Toward the end of the PAR study Beatriz confided that she had never considered herself to be a leader until she heard other parents' validations of her strengths. She had always known she was a determined and strong-willed person, but "being Mexican" in the United States made her doubt her inner voice and expertise. By becoming conscious of systemic inequities and discrimination within institutions, specifically schools, Beatriz realized her feelings of disempowerment originated from pejorative messages she was internalizing from dominant culture media and propaganda. As she gained awareness of her own power within institutional systems, she also understood that her struggles with powerlessness were not in isolation; rather, she was connected to historically underserved populations on a global level. In other words as Beatriz became critically conscious of the "root causes of social problems" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 83) she, with the support of other parents, developed a sophisticated understanding of how her challenges on the microlevel were endemic of larger social issues occurring on the macrolevel. With this realization, Beatriz committed herself to serving other parents whose struggles mirrored her own.

THE SPIRIT OF PAR IN URBAN EDUCATION REFORM

At its core, PAR presents a blueprint for equity-minded educators who are committed to establishing and maintaining authentic collaborative relationships with families. The successful implementation of PAR is not predicated on the involvement of outside researchers. Instead, the goal of PAR in edu-

cation is to liberate all stakeholders, from dominant and minority groups alike, from oppressive hegemonic structures that squelch opportunities for critical collaborative dialogue and inquiry (Hynds, 2010). Emancipation requires that each stakeholder believes that he or she can generate change without the external influence of "experts" (Freire, 1970/2000).

In urban education reform PAR is a strategy that stakeholders can use to engage resistance as a tool in a variety of school settings. Resistance, when conceptualized as a necessary vehicle through which challenges are discussed through acceptance and meaningful dialogue, becomes a powerful tool in reshaping relationships between school personnel and families. Educators who are committed to creating equitable and authentic partnerships with families may instigate the PAR process in a number of ways. Teachers and school leaders begin the process by reflecting upon their privileged positions and the ways in which their roles may be perceived by families from all backgrounds. Then they must be willing to examine school policies and individual practices that impede social justice for historically underserved groups. As the community begins to develop a critical consciousness, discussions with parents and families can genuinely engage shared visions of success for students and begin to deconstruct some of the assumptions that surround what constitutes family involvement. These conversations, within third space, provide equal negotiating power and decision making for all involved and create the opportunity to construct new patterns of local policy development. To ensure that ideas and suggestions lead to transformative changes, a cogenerated action plan can be used as a tool to document goals, responsibilities, and outcomes. If resistance among stakeholders arises and is particularly intense, an objective third-party member who can facilitate or mediate the discussion is critical. This person should be carefully selected and approved by all stakeholders. The PAR process can help create the conditions for families and school personnel to build a common vision for inclusive education that provides the opportunities to learn, participate, and benefit from a robust curriculum and carefully designed learning environments that are differentiated based on the unique characteristics of each child and his or her cultural and linguistic histories.

CONCLUSION

Historically underserved families who have children with disabilities have been traditionally viewed as existing outside of the system as separate, powerless entities who have had little to contribute. They have proven, time and time again, their strength and worth as they resist oppressive structures and defy negative categorizations of their cultural and linguistic legacies. Their persistence for equality within the educational system has exposed se-

vere institutional gaps. As we realize their marginalization has been socially constructed in both intentional and nondeliberate ways, we awaken to the injustices that impact our schools.

Transformational frameworks, such as the Systemic Change Framework, offer these families an equal and fair opportunity to sit among educators as colleagues and as cogenerators of knowledge. These frameworks call for a paradigm shift in which hierarchies that currently influence school-based institutions are repositioned to reflect an "empowering, horizontal" approach (Figueroa, Kincaid, Rani, & Lewis, 2002, p. ii) rather than the dominant top-down. These collaborative shifts in power will enable historically underserved families to participate and contribute fully to the overall success and empowerment of future students. By establishing a clear and designated space through which genuine trust has been earned and developed over time, families' voices are heard and accepted. Within this positive and collaborative environment, families may no longer need to resist school personnel or the institutions they represent. Instead, as equal contributors to the improvement of school practices, families and school personnel can practice authentic collaboration in the construction of new knowledge inclusive of every stakeholder's input. In this manner, urban school reform is transformative and sustainable.

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